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## JORDANIAN STUDENTS ATTITUDES TOWARD SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore, in depth, the attitudes of middle school and secondary school students about social studies in Jordan's Irbid Province, with teacher and learning variables. Using a qualitative research approach, two groups of eighth and eleventh grade students was interviewed in the Irbid Province of Jordan regarding their perceptions of social studies. A total of forty-eight students were selected to participate in this qualitative study. The research revealed that the students in both middle school and secondary school valued social studies, while at the same time they did not rate social studies as their most favorite courses. Students indicated that many teachers continued to depend on textbooks and lectures as the main method for teaching. In addition, students put a high value on teacher enthusiasm and encouragements. Generally speaking, in 2004 Alazzi and Chiodo concluded that "social studies not favorite subject for male social studies students in Jordan. Some eight years later, the same can be said regarding females social studies.

The study recommended that to improve social studies education in Jordan, the Ministry of Education should abandon its role of selecting and controlling subjects included in the social studies curricula. Social studies curricula should be revised to include the most recent available information and to reflect contemporary research in social studies education in order to prepare young Jordanians for the new millennium.

**Keywords:** Jordanian Students, Attitudes, Social Studies Education.

### Introduction

Schooling in all societies purports to teach students the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function as responsible citizens. In a democratic society, schools translate these curricular goals into knowledge of the community, nation, and world. Schooling also translates to the skills required to participate competently within the larger society. It also helps promote and protect one's interests and the democratic attitudes that form the bases for decision making on one's behalf while keeping in mind the larger context of the common good (Parker, 1999).

In Jordan, the goal of social studies education is to prepare young people to be good citizens in a world that is becoming increasingly complex. The Jordanian Ministry of Education divides

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social studies objectives into four categories: knowledge, skills, values, and participation. These four categories require global perspective as an essential tool for performing successfully in a complex and rapidly changing world (Ministry of Education, 2008).

In the country of Jordan, the Ministry of Education defines social studies much like it is stated in the United States. The goal of social studies education in both Jordan and in the United States is to prepare young people to be good citizens in a world that is becoming more and more complex. The National Council for Social Studies divides social studies objectives into four categories: knowledge, skills, values, and participation. These four categories of social studies learning are also addressed in the objectives declared by the Jordan Ministry of Education for elementary schools and high schools alike (Ministry of Education, 2008). Each of these categories provides the basis of curriculum development in both United States and Jordan. The Ministry of Education in Jordan requires middle school and high school social studies departments to teach courses in the following subject areas: history, geography, citizenship education, and social education. Textbooks are used in these subject areas, along with teacher developed resources with the primary purpose of achieving the education goals of the Jordanian social studies education program.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Jordan's people are facing various social, economic, and educational difficulties regarding the structure of their school system. As is true for many societies, Jordan is rapidly industrializing; consequently its citizens will need to develop the knowledge and skills to run factories, industries, and businesses. The success of Jordan's stability and growth relies strongly on its educational system. Social studies is an major part of the school curriculum because it explores morals, values, and provides students with the ability to understand the values associated with being a good citizen.

Students who have a sound understanding of their country's culture and historical development will be more inclined to address recent societal problems. To help the Jordanian people to cope with rapid economic, social, and political developments, and to bring about meaningful participatory citizenship among younger students, a vital social studies curriculum is needed. Therefore, it becomes necessary to examine the attitudes expressed toward social studies by the students in Jordan's public schools. Since the Ministry of Education in Jordan is currently reviewing the social studies curriculum, it was the assumption of the researcher that in order to develop and update the curriculum, an exploration into students' attitudes toward social studies should be conducted. Undoubtedly, this will trigger an interest in social studies and uncover answers to several puzzling questions.

This study was designed to investigate the attitudes of students towards the social studies who were in middle schools and secondary schools in Jordan's Irbid Province. The following questions were used to direct the research study. What are the perceptions of students toward the current social studies curriculum in their schools? What are the implications for curriculum changes based on these attitudes?.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study was conducted to examine the attitudes of middle and secondary school social studies students toward the social studies education because students are most involved daily in the delivery of social studies. This is significant because the knowledge base and its implications could influence the social studies curricula nationwide due to the centralized nature of curricula designed and planned in the country.

### **Related Research**

WILKINS (2010) indicated that " teachers and students attitudes can and do influence instructional practice. Understanding teachers' attitudes toward all subjects can provide additional information that could help explain differences in the instructional practices associated with the different subject areas.

A review of the related literature revealed little research about social studies education and the curriculum in Jordan. Most studies focused on higher education; none focused specifically on middle and high school education. Alazzi and Chiodo (2004) conducted an examination of the content in social studies textbooks. Their questionnaire addressed curriculum, textbooks, teaching methods, learning objectives, and education experience. Based on his analysis of social studies textbooks, curriculum, and teaching methods, the researchers emphasized a strong need for improvement in the current social studies curriculum in Jordan's middle schools. They found that all aspects of the social studies curriculum needed significant improvement based on western standards.

Alajaji(1999), Banjar (1984), and Al-Thuwaini (1986) conducted studies on teacher's attitudes towards social studies curricula in Saudi Arabia . The three studies concluded that social studies teachers believe all aspects of social studies curricula need to be improved and developed.

In 1992, Al-Aklobi surveyed the attitudes of social studies teachers and supervisors toward social studies education in boys' secondary schools in the Saudi Eastern Province. He found that the teachers and supervisors have negative attitudes toward social studies

In 2011, Alazzi and Aldowan conducted an evaluation of Jordan's tenth grade social studies curriculum. The researchers discussed both the status of social studies, and the problems present in the curriculum as viewed by social studies teachers. The textbooks were studied to determine their strengths and weaknesses. Their research suggested that the social studies objectives did not assist students in their development of critical thinking or critical inquiry.

In the United States, Lawson, (2003) surveyed 100 tenth grade students and 100 twelfth grade students in order to determine their attitudes towards the various academic areas. In the study, English, mathematics, and reading were ranked ahead of social studies. Participants described social studies as boring and far from anything they could relate to in their life.

In recent research in the United States on student's attitudes toward social studies, Chiodo and Byford (2004) conducted a study inquiring into the attitudes students possessed regarding social studies. They interviewed eighth and eleventh grade students and found that two themes emerged. The first theme suggested that a teacher's involvement and enthusiasm led to positive images of social studies by middle and high school students. The second theme suggested that student's positive attitudes toward social studies were based on their perceived utilitarian value of the subject matter.

Related to the area of student attitudes toward the social studies curriculum is student attitudes toward the teacher. (Alazzi and Chiodo, 2004) founded that the teacher- learning environment played a key role in shaping students' attitudes about social studies. Teachers who were willing to assist students in learning, showed enthusiasm in the classroom, and paid close attention to student needs had a strong effect on how students felt about social studies. The effective teacher was capable of creating a positive learning climate in the classroom. Both classroom settings and students attitudes could be altered to improve students' thoughts of social studies (Wheeler& Ryan, 1993). Mager (1978) indicated that attitude alone contributed largely to teacher success. First, how a student judged a teacher was linked to the students' potential for developing an open-minded attitude about the subject. Second, students who had a positive attitude toward the subject matter were more likely to continue being focused on that particular

subject. Third, students' feelings regarding school helped to positively shape relationships with parents, teachers, and peers. Both Mag (1968) and Haladyna (1982) showed that the approach the teacher takes when teaching social studies had a unique influence on school curriculum.

Beyond the international research cited, there have been few additional studies on the topic. Therefore, a study relating to students' perceptions of social studies in Jordan is important for educational reforms in that country.

### **Research Method**

Alazzi and Chiodo (2004) conducted a similar qualitative analysis of social studies perceptions in Jordan. The purpose of their study was to examine student's perceptions of middle and high school students in Jordan. With methodological modifications, a similar theoretical and conceptual platform was utilized in this study (Lintner, 2006). In their study, Alazzi and Chiodo targeted teachers and male students in an effort to understand social studies in Jordan. For this initial study, the scope of inquiry was narrowed to only middle and secondary female's students in Jordan (Lintner, 2006).

The researcher interviewed public school student (girls) in Jordan to find out: What are the attitudes of eighth and eleventh grade students toward social studies? Specifically, we wanted to know: 1) How does a teacher stimulate student interest in social studies? 2) How does teaching methodology shape the attitudes of students towards social studies? 3) Do students see any correlation between social studies to the present and future? 4) What are some of the students' concerns or recommendations regarding the social studies curriculum and instruction? 5) Do the students' comments and concerns regarding social studies change between middle school and high school? By analyzing the findings of this study, educators will learn new information about students' perceptions of social studies in the country of Jordan.

In Jordan the Muslim Religion prohibits co educational schools at the middle and high school level of instruction. However, there are some co educational elementary schools in the country. For comparative purposes, we chose a middle and high school for girls rather than mixing schools for both boys and girls.

A phenomenological research design was used to capture a student's sense of appreciation for the social studies curriculum. For the purpose of this study, data needed to be gathered in order to explore and interpret student attitudes towards the social studies curriculum and teaching methodology. Phenomenological research involves philosophical roots of phenomenology, focusing on experience and interpretation (Creswell, 2008). When conducting the phenomenological study, the assumption that there is an essence of a shared experience which is present. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essence of the phenomenon (Gay, 2008).

### **Participants and Sample**

We randomly selected two groups of eighth grade (middle school) and eleventh (high school) grade male students. They were interviewed on their perceptions of social studies. These particular grades were chosen for the research study taking into account research on brain growth development of middle and secondary school (Bosowski, 1981).

When the study was conducted, three hundred and forty students were enrolled in eighth grade, while five hundred and sixty students were enrolled in eleventh grade. A total of forty-eight students (24, eighth grade students, and 24 high school students) were chosen to participate, using a two- phase random sampling from each perspective grade. We selected four classes from each school and then, randomly, selected students from each class to ensure proper representation.

The participants in the study were randomly selected by "purposeful sampling." The sampling is based on the assumption that the researcher wants to discover, understand and gain insight from a situation. During "purposeful sampling" subjects are selected according to how they give consideration to the average person and situation (Gay, 2008). Therefore, with certainty, we chose to study younger (eighth grade) and older (eleventh grade) students.

### **Data Analysis**

The study was conducted in the Irbid province in Jordan where schools are required to teach social studies as part of the school curriculum. This requirement comes from the Ministry of Education, where the core curriculums are developed by the government. The Ministry of Education identifies social studies as history, geography, citizenship education, and general culture. The goal of social studies education in Jordan is to prepare young people to be intelligent and compassionate citizens. Local school districts are responsible for implementing these goals into the social studies curriculum.

Both eighth and eleventh grade participants were located in a community with a population of 200,000 permanent residents. Two universities are located within the community; one university is public and the other one is private. The school district consists of 18,441 male students. The middle school in which the study was conducted was one of ten similar-size middle schools within the district. The social studies content covered in the school curriculum included citizenship education for sixth grade, ancient civilization for seventh grade, and Europe history for eighth grade.

The high school students who participated in the study were from one of eight high schools located in the community. The particular high school chosen had a student population of nearly 3000 students. The way Social studies courses operated in the high schools were similar to the middle schools. The only difference was the content of the courses. Ninth grade students are required to take geography and Arab and Muslim history. Tenth grade students are required to take geography and Ottoman Empire. It is mandatory for eleventh grade students to take Modern Arab History and general culture. Finally twelfth grade students are required to take history of Jordan, Arab geography and World geography. There is however, an exception made for high school students who specialize in a scientific field. They are not required to enroll in the social studies program.

This phenomenological research study was designed to inquire into the attitudes of eighth and eleventh grade students. However, it is important to realize that the data collected and the methods used for both grades were similar, not identical. In both grades, we interviewed each participant, took careful notes, and audio taped each individual as they answered questions. The interviews were transcribed for the participants of both grades.

All interviews were conducted from June to August. The purpose of the interviews was to discover the over- all opinions of eighth and eleventh grade students regarding the social studies curriculum and instruction. A number of general questions were used from previous studies to initially guide the interviews (Appendix A).

Interviews were tape recorded to ensure accuracy, and later transcribed. Each transcript was verified by listening to the audiotape while reading the documentation. Data analysis followed the Diener and Crandall's (1978) model of social and behavioral research. Notes were taken for each interview, describing nonverbal cues and posture of each student. The text of each interview was then coded and resulting themes were noted. Then, reinforcing themes were established within the bound system (eighth grade) through comparisons with field notes. The

same procedure was completed for the second bound system (eleventh grade). Neither researcher was employed by the school system, or knew the students who participated.

The use of predetermined questions and consistent procedures in coding supported the reliability of the findings. Data finding was given special attention in order to assess previous research. Each group was compared to the other, tracing the development of students' perceptions of social studies through the reaction of the middle school and high school students.

### **Research findings**

This study was designed to explore, in depth, the attitudes of middle school and secondary school students about social studies in Jordan's Irbid Province, with teacher and learning variables. As a result of analysis of data two themes emerged from this study. The first theme indicated that teachers' involvement and enthusiasm led to a positive image of social studies by middle and secondary school students. The second theme indicated if and to what extent both groups valued social studies education.

Throughout their past years in school, students acquired experience, knowledge, and insight related to what they learned in social studies. This insight, in the long run, benefited the researchers who felt that the students gave an honest account of their attitudes toward the social studies curriculum.

All through the interviews the students seemed to be honest, open minded, and expressed a genuine interest for social studies. Other themes mentioned in the interviews, such as an undemocratic educational system, discipline, (pertaining to several topics) and the importance of a clean campus did not change students' perceptions of social studies. During the interviews, students expressed the importance of a solid education, which included social studies education, active learning, and teacher enthusiasm. All these elements helped to instill a positive attitude in the students.

The results showed that the teacher played a major role in how well the students learned. They could make students love social studies or hate it. If the teacher's enthusiasm for the lesson being presented was noticed by the students, they would most likely feed off the teacher's energy. Of course, possessing knowledge of the subject would also make students perk up and listen. But knowledge is only half of what it takes to spark a student's curiosity. Both middle and secondary school students expressed their concerns regarding teaching methodology and how boring it was when the teacher had little knowledge about instruction.

All students expressed the need for thought-provoking activities, such as discussion or debate, as well as contests, and games for being able to answer challenging questions about their culture or another culture. For eighth grade students, the main concern regarding teaching styles was teachers who lecture from only the textbook. The students' reactions reflected Stiller's (1988) research regarding teachers who used one method of instruction. This limited way of teaching inhibited student motivation, as it lacked a variety of teaching techniques—techniques every teacher must bring into the classroom. Eighth grade students, for the most part, were very enthusiastic about classroom discussion and debate.

For secondary school students, there was a great desire for new instructional techniques. They wanted teachers to involve students in class discussions, letting them express their opinions on the subject matter. They felt that the teacher should not dominate the class discussion and should allow and encourage students to voice what they feel about a particular story/lesson. For them, class must be about positive interaction between teacher and student (interview with student # 3).

Social studies was viewed by the students as being in a rut. The reason so many students said they had a hard time enjoying it was the curriculum is restricted to a traditional system—the same traditional system that uses tests to measure how much a student has retained. This system also uses textbooks, with little thought-provoking material. The majority of students responded that their social studies teacher relied on the text, lecturing, video, worksheets and traditional tests as methods of learning.

Students seemed to support Hess's (2001) statement that teaching with discussion and allowing students an opportunity to give feedback will enhance their desire for knowledge. Furthermore, teaching with discussion allows students to develop personal skills and enhances critical thinking and self-confidence.

I like history teacher, who made me feel passionate about history. Before that a live experience, I took a history class with outdated and outmoded information, lectures that practically put me to sleep; the class was not even worth my energy. However, that kind of teacher engaged students in the history of events. It seemed like she took her students back to the past. She made history my first choice, not my last (interview with students # 5).

Students agreed they enjoyed class when a teacher was enthusiastic and excited about the subject. Moreover, according to the students', enthusiasm and excitement is what brings students to feel motivated, and have a strong desire to learn. Students also said when they enjoyed the class, they treated teachers with respect.

I hate teachers who are rigid and narrow minded, even if that teacher is knowledgeable about his subject; it still doesn't mean the students will learn. I love teachers who are tolerant, calm and teachers who treat their students with respect, greeting them each day with a warm smile (interview with students #8).

The comments by the students seemed to agree with Fouts (1987), Fouts, and Biao (1993), and McGowan, Sutton, and Smith (1990). Their arguments were that teachers' positive perceptions in the classroom maybe more effective than any one method of teaching.

In these studies we did not find negative perceptions toward social studies education being expressed by middle and high school students. Evidence of this was gathered from both informal conversations and questions addressed to all students. This supports Chiodo and Byford's (2004) research regarding the subject. These researchers found no negative perception toward social studies in the middle and high school students in a southwestern school system in the United States.

Conversations with students (35 students) indicated that social studies was useful and of great importance for their future. Eighteen out of the 24 middle school students were pleased with the social studies curriculum taught in school. Students also revealed that they learned from their citizenship education class about patriotism and supporting the country. This contradicts studies conducted by Alazzi and Aldowan in Jordan (2011) regarding what is learned from the social studies curriculum. We found that the content areas of the social studies curriculum were valued by the students.

I find it very important that I took civic education and history classes. I learned from the civic education class, how the political system operates and I learned about the Constitution of Jordan, about my responsibilities and my rights in my country. I learned from history class about the history of my country, and world history (interview with student's# 1).

Students revealed that an interest in social studies, in both the middle and high school, resulted in progress, ultimately preparing them for the future. These comments, however, contradict research findings by Haladyna (1982) and Schug (1982) that suggested middle school and high school students saw little relevance in social studies, and that it was boring. Also, previous studies in the United States revealed students' interests dropped with every grade level (Greenblatt, 1962; Haladyna and Thompson, 1979; Herman, 1965; Jersild, 1949).

In Jordan, high school students also expressed the value of social studies education. Students realize the importance of learning and understanding government systems; they were aware that they had a responsibility toward their country. Twenty of the 24 high school students described the importance of citizenship education and history. Students said that geography and general culture classes touched their daily lives and helped link them to their heritage.

I think the general culture class has given me background knowledge of how a democratic government operates, especially in the democrat world. This class will help me and my classmates, who want to study law and anthropology in college (interview with students# 9).

This contradicts Alazzi and Aldowan (2011) study conducted in Jordan, which revealed that social studies objectives did not assist students in their development of critical thinking or critical inquiry.

In our research twelve high school students out of twenty-four, and twenty- one middle school students out of twenty- four rank social studies as one of their three or four favorite classes. Both middle and secondary school students often selected science and mathematics, English and Arabic as their first or second choice because of the labor market or economic opportunity. These rankings support Lawson, (2003), Chiodo, Byford (2002), Schug, Todd, and Beery's (1982) research regarding the subject.

### **Implications**

The research we have conducted in the Jordanian schools reveals that students in both middle school and high school value social studies, while at the same time they did not rate the courses as their favorite choice among classes. Students also believed that social studies were a good option for an elective course. Class climate, teacher enthusiasm, methodology and previous experience were the main factors found that improve the image social studies as part of the curriculum. Students revealed that many teachers continue to depend on textbooks and lectures as a main tool for teaching. These two methods focus traditionally on presenting information rather than taking an interactive approach.

In interpreting the findings of our research, we believe that social studies teachers in Jordan should not focus exclusively on lectures and memorization; students should be given the opportunity to ask questions and discuss their answers. Students should be introduced to a practical application of the content related to the Jordanian society through field trips and other "hands- on" experiences. In addition, Jordanian teachers need to be aware of individual differences among students: different levels of intelligence, different learning styles, and differences relating to comprehension of understanding subject/material. Because of these differences, teachers must not only realize, but also study the differences and use a variety of teaching strategies to ensure that all students have a quality education. It is very important that teachers evaluate various methods, applying them to each student as they see fit. It is important for teachers to understand that the teacher is the key factor in a students' perception of social studies. When teachers use different teaching strategies to improve the learning climate, it is possible that a positive attitude about social studies will transpire (Stiler, 1988).



As a result, the social studies curriculum in Jordan should be revised to include the most recent available information and to reflect contemporary research in social studies education in order to prepare young Jordanians for living in the twenty first century. The failure of these implications could cause a decline in the positive attitudes toward social studies in the country.

### Conclusion

In closing, the researchers believe that the participants' experience described in this study represent what might occur in any middle or high school in Jordan. Additional research is needed to add or refute the conclusion of this study. This study was conducted in two schools in the same school district and this could be a potential deficiency. Further studies are needed from different districts in order to analysis a broad base of students. The expectation, environment, and socioeconomic statuses may not be the same from different school settings. Therefore, the attitudes of the students, teachers, and parents may all vary. Although this study was conducted on only female students, further studies necessary should be conducted on male's students. Indeed, these two bound systems (8<sup>th</sup> and 11th grade students) may be the exception and not necessarily the rule.

Since this research used phenomenological method of qualitative analysis, quantitative methods should also be conducted. Although we are satisfied with the facts and findings, the limitation of qualitative studies are recognized. A broad quantitative survey may further assistant to the understanding of student's perception toward social studies.

Regardless of the limitations found in this study, the researchers still believe that findings add to our understanding of a student's perception toward social studies in Jordan. These perceptions need to receive attention on a regular basis in order to make sure we have progress in assisting our students in acquiring knowledge, skills, and a healthy perception toward social studies.

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## Appendix A

### Student Interview Question

1. What do you think the ideal social studies classroom is like?
2. Some students would say that social studies courses do little to help them in preparation for the future. Would you agree with them or disagree with them? Please explain.
3. How would you rate your social studies classes using a scale of favorite to least favorites? Please explain.
4. Suppose you could change anything about social studies class. What would it be?
5. What do you think the best method or way to learn social studies?
6. How important is the teacher in your attitude toward social studies? Please explain.